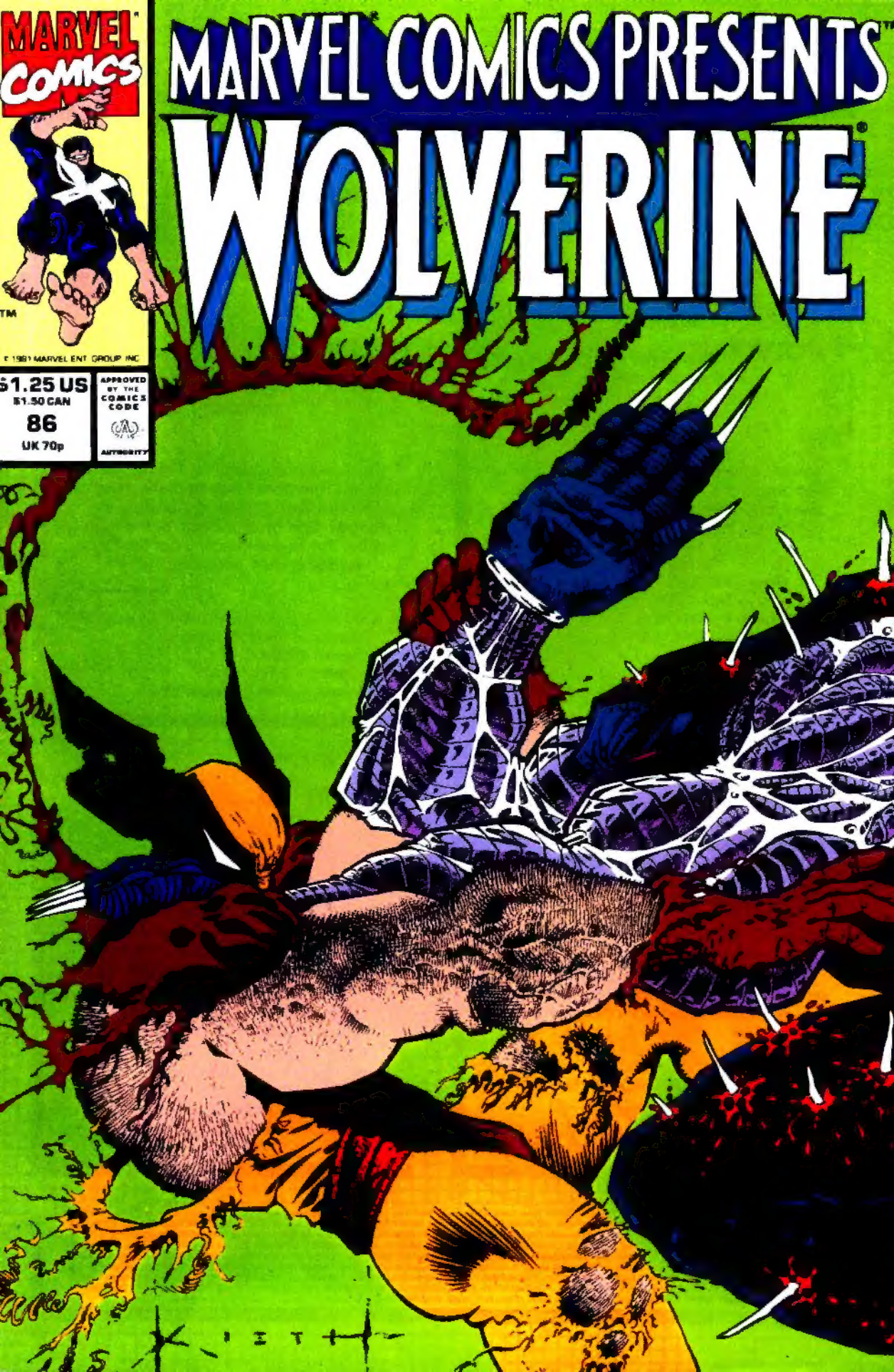
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Page

WOLVERINE 1

BLOOD HUNGRY
PART 2 OF 8
"TWO SCENTS"

Last issue, we were introduced to a new menace to the city of Madripoor. . .Cyber! But what are his plans—and what is his connection to Wolverine?

Writer— PETER DAVID
Artist — SAM KIETH
Letterer — CLEM ROBINS
Colorist — GLYNIS OLIVER

Page

FIRESTAR 9

LIFE DURING WAR TIME
PART 5 OF 8
"TRUE COLORS"

To save her father's life, Firestar has battled Freedom Force and unwittingly put the lives of innocent people in danger. Can Firestar discover the truth behind the mysterious Arms of Salvation and stop their nefarious plans?

Writers — MARIE JAVINS/MARCUS McLAURIN
Penciler — DWAYNE TURNER
Inker — CHRIS IVY
Letterer — DAVE SHARPE
Colorist — MARCUS McLAURIN

Page

BEAST 17

JUST FRIENDS
PART 2 OF 8

Trying to break the grip of nostalgia over his life before becoming the Beast, Hank McCoy learned he was invited to an International Symposium on Mutant Research. But there's something wrong in the state of Belgium—a serial killer is on the loose, a hired assassin is on the prowl, and the most important woman in Hank's life *may* be waiting in the wings. . .

Writer — SCOTT LOBDELL
Pencilers — ROB LIEFELD/JAE LEE
Inker — TIM DZON
Letterer — TODD KLEIN
Colorist — MIKE THOMAS

Page

PALADIN 25

Don't ask him his real name, he won't tell you. He'll tell you he's a super-strong, highly paid mercenary of mysterious origin. What he lacks in modesty and altruism, he makes up for in ego and arrogance. He's Paladin, Super Soldier-of-Fortune!

Writer — ERIC FEIN
Penciler — J. ADAM WALTERS
Inker — SAM DELAROSA
Letterer — DIANA ALBERS
Colorist — FERNANDO MENDEZ

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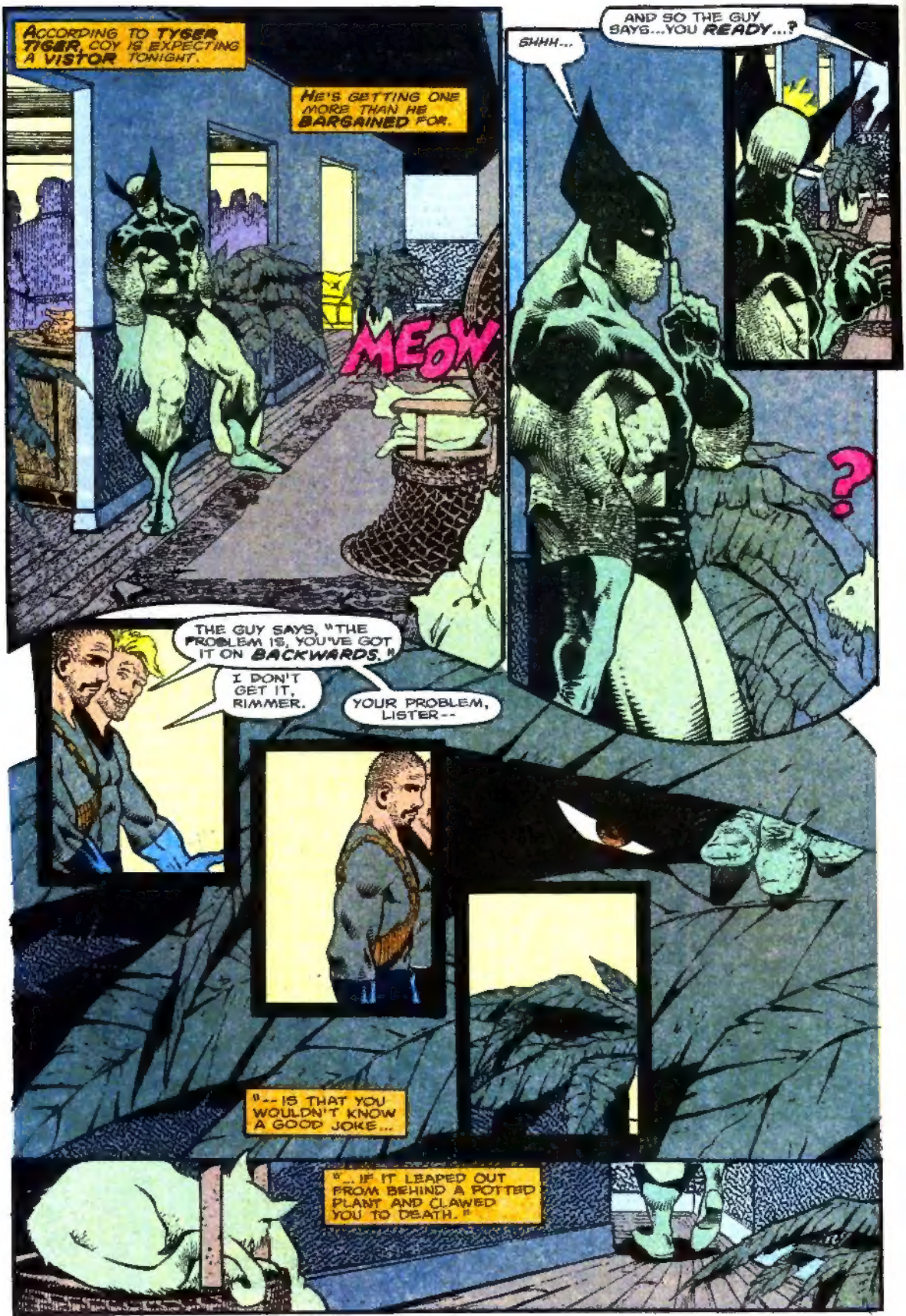
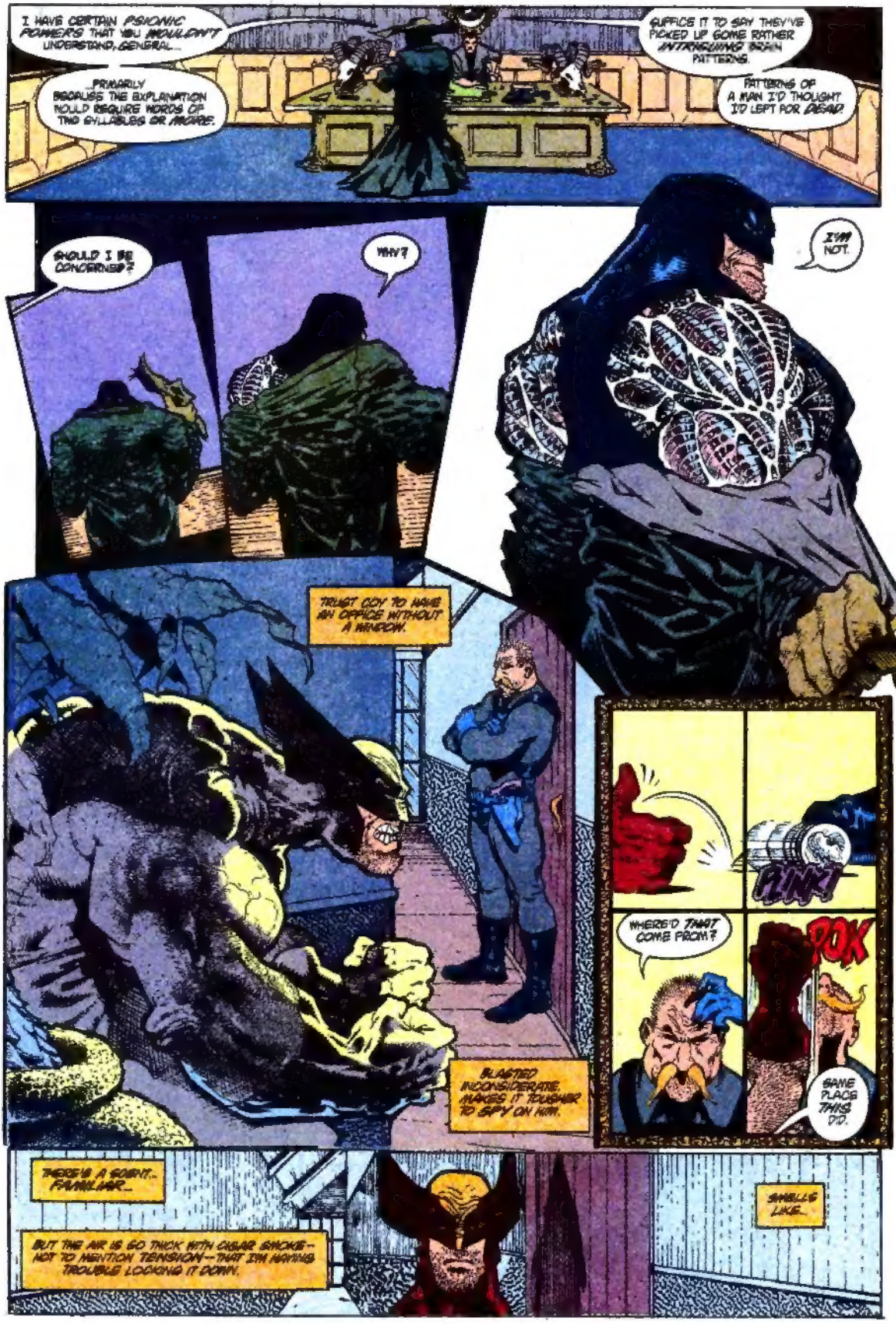
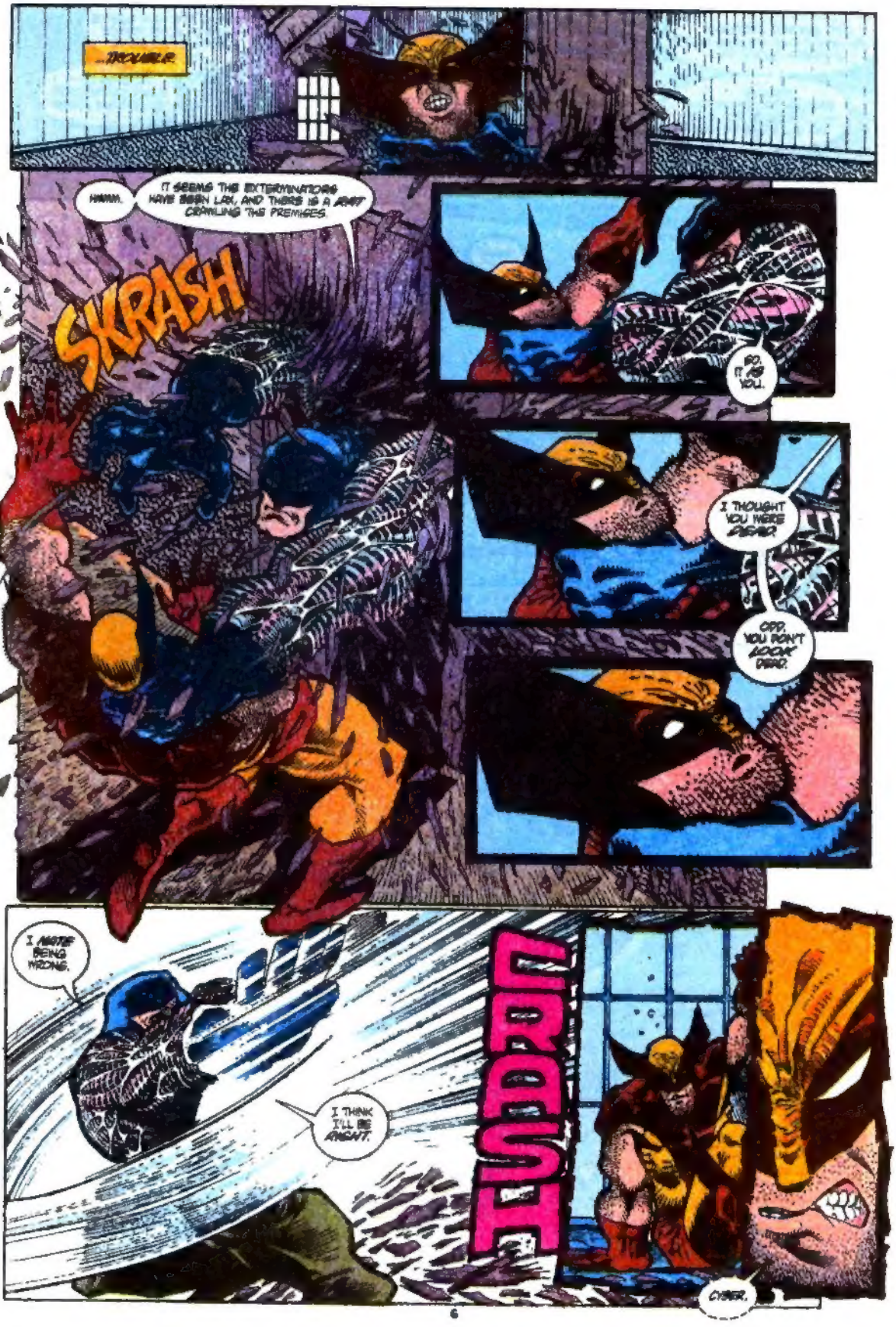
BLOOD HUNGRY
PART TWO
TWO SCENTS WORTH
I ALWAYS KNEW IF I STAYED IN MADRIPOOR LONG ENOUGH, I'D END UP CLIMBING THE WALLS.
FORTUNATELY, ADAMANTIUM CLAWS AND A BASIC LACK OF FEAR
SHUNKT
SHUNKT
SHUNKT
...AND COMMON SENSE...
...FACILITATE MATTERS.

GENERAL COY...
THAT CERTAIN GENTLEMAN REPRESENTING THOSE CERTAIN MEN IS HERE.
ARE YOU CERTAIN?
YES, SIR.
THEN SEND HIM IN.
GREETINGS, SIR. I AM COY.
I MYSELF AM PAINFULLY SHY.
MOST HUMOROUS. PLEASE SIT.
YES. I KNOW.
THERE'S NO CHAIR.
I UNDERSTAND YOU HAVE SOME GOODS YOU WISH TO MOVE.
I REPRESENT MEN WHO DO. THEY--
NOT I SEASE SOMETHING.

I THINK OF ALL THE THINGS I COULD BE DOING TONIGHT & SOMEHOW, HANGING OUTSIDE OF GENERAL JOE'S ISN'T HIGH UP THERE.
I, HOWEVER, AM HIGH UP THERE...
...THANKS TO THE RATHER QUIET INSISTENCE OF TYGER TYGER...
LOGAN... WOULD YOU DO ANYTHING I ASK?
DEPENDS.
YOU CAN'T ANSWER THAT QUESTION WITH ANOTHER QUESTION. EITHER YOU WILL OR YOU WON'T.
YOU'RE RIGHT.
I AM?
YEAH. EITHER I WILL, OR I WON'T.
KIND OF MAKES YOU WONDER WHERE THIS CONVERSATION IS HEADING. AND WHY DO I HAVE THE FEELING THAT I'M GOING TO BE SEEING SOME ACTION TONIGHT, AND IT'S NOT THE SORT I HAD IN MIND.
WOMEN. CAN'T LIVE WITH 'EM...

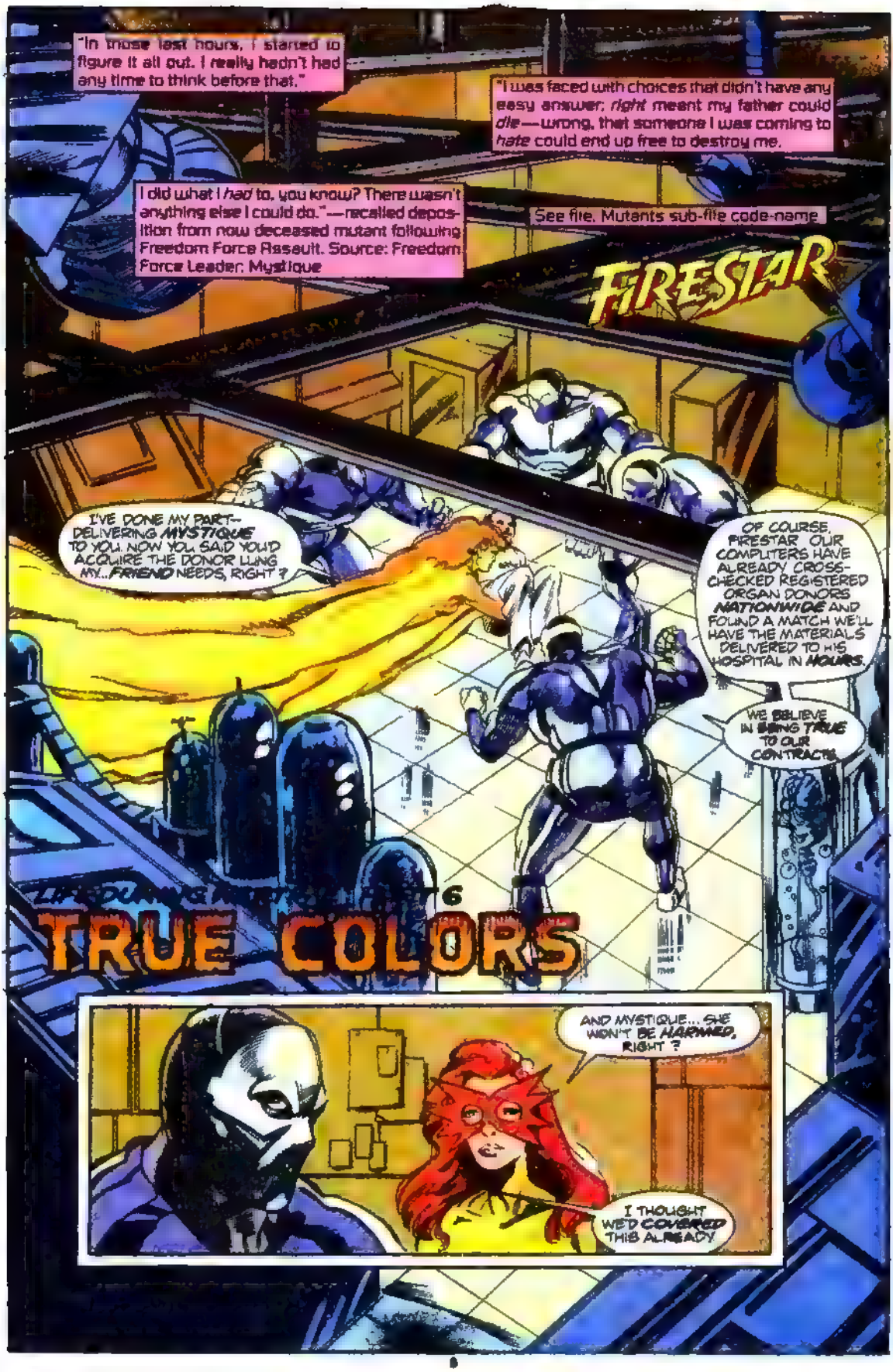

ACCORDING TO TYGER TYGER, COY IS EXPECTING A VISITOR TONIGHT.
HE'S GETTING ONE MORE THAN HE BARGAINED FOR.
MEOW
SHHH...
AND SO THE GUY SAYS...YOU READY...?
?
THE GUY SAYS, "THE PROBLEM IS, YOU'VE GOT IT ON BACKWARDS."
I DON'T GET IT, RIMMER.
YOUR PROBLEM, LISTER--
"--IS THAT YOU WOULDN'T KNOW A GOOD JOKE...
"...IF IT LEAPED OUT FROM BEHIND A POTTED PLANT AND CLAWED YOU TO DEATH."


I HAVE CERTAIN PSIONIC POWERS THAT YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND, GENERAL...
...PRIMARILY BECAUSE THE EXPLANATION WOULD REQUIRE WORDS OF TWO SYLLABLES OR MORE.
SUFFICE IT TO SAY THEY'VE PICKED UP SOME RATHER INTRIGUING BRAIN PATTERNS.
PATTERNS OF A MAN I'D THOUGHT I'D LEFT FOR DEAD!
SHOULD I BE CONCERNED?
WHY?
I'M NOT.
TRUST COY TO HAVE AN OFFICE WITHOUT A WINDOW.
BLASTED INCONSIDERATE. MAKES IT TOUGHER TO SPY ON HIM.
FUNK!
WHERE'D THAT COME FROM?
POK
SAME PLACE THIS DID.
THERE'S A SCENT... FAMILIAR...
BUT THE AIR IS SO THICK WITH CIGAR SMOKE -- NOT TO MENTION TENSION -- THAT I'M HAVING TROUBLE LOCKING IT DOWN.
SMELLS LIKE...


...DECLINE P.
HMMM.
IT SEEMS THE EXTERMINATORS HAVE BEEN LAX, AND THERE IS A RAT CRAWLING THE PREMISES.
SKRASH
IT IS YOU.
I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD.
ODD, YOU DON'T LOOK DEAD.
I HATE BEING WRONG.
I THINK I'LL BE RIGHT.
SMASH
CYBER.

CYBER!
FINALLY!
YOU DON'T KNOW HOW MANY YEARS I'VE WANTED FOR THIS!
YES, I DO.
SINK!
I WAS THERE, WHEN YOU TRIED TO KILL ME LAST TIME.
AND YOU WERE NO MORE SUCCESSFUL... THAN THIS TIME.
ARRRAHHH!

LET'S SEE HOW WELL YOUR HEALING FACTOR WORKS...
...WHEN I STRANGULE YOU WITH YOUR LOWER INTESTINES.
NOW WHY ARE YOU RUNNING AWAY!?
COULD IT BE YOU'RE AFRAID OF ME?
OR ARE YOU TOO JUST BEING COY?
THERE'S BLOOD ALL OVER THE FLOOR! WHAT HAPPENED HERE?!
SOMEONE BLED.
TO BE CONTINUED...


"In those last hours, I started to figure it all out. I really hadn't had any time to think before that."
"I was faced with choices that didn't have any easy answer; *right* meant my father could *die*—wrong, that someone I was coming to *hate* could end up free to destroy me.
I did what I *had* to, you know? There wasn't anything else I could do."—recalled deposition from now deceased mutant following Freedom Force Assault. Source: Freedom Force Leader: Mystique
See file, Mutants sub-file code-name
FIRESTAR
I'VE DONE MY PART—DELIVERING MYSTIQUE TO YOU. NOW YOU SAID YOU'D ACQUIRE THE DONOR LUNG MY...FRIEND NEEDS, RIGHT?
OF COURSE, FIRESTAR. OUR COMPUTERS HAVE ALREADY CROSS-CHECKED REGISTERED ORGAN DONORS NATIONWIDE AND FOUND A MATCH. WE'LL HAVE THE MATERIALS DELIVERED TO HIS HOSPITAL IN HOURS.
WE BELIEVE IN BEING TRUE TO OUR CONTRACTS.
6
TRUE COLORS
AND MYSTIQUE... SHE WON'T BE HARMED, RIGHT?
I THOUGHT WE'D COVERED THIS ALREADY

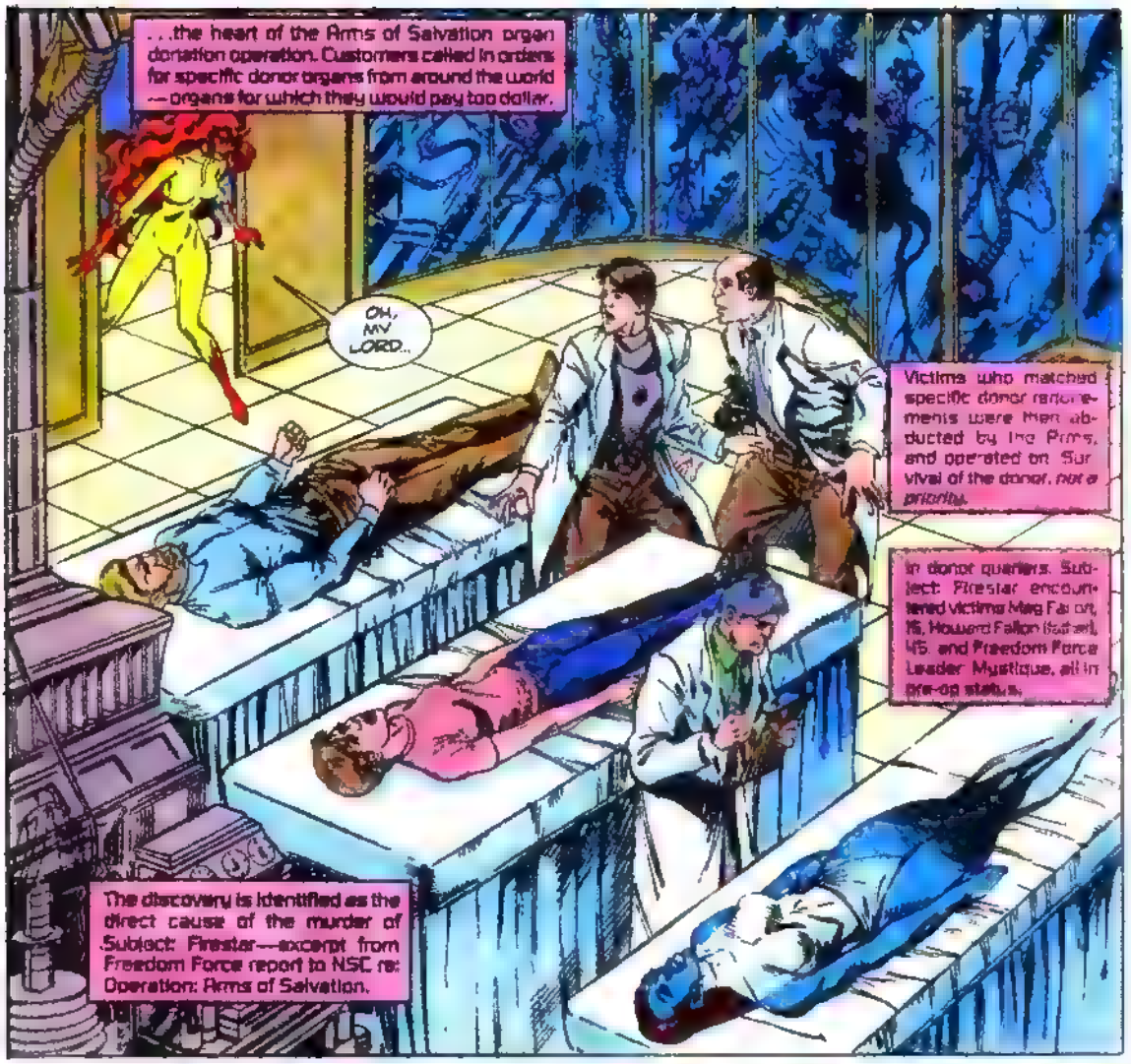
WE SIMPLY WANT A TISSUE SAMPLE FROM MYSTIQUE TO HELP OUR RESEARCH. A METAMORPH LIKE HER COULD BE INVALUABLE IN POSSIBLY HALTING ALL ORGAN REJECTION.
SHE'LL BE RELEASED WHEN WE HAVE WHAT WE WANT.
I'M SURPRISED TO SEE YOU WORRY SO MUCH OVER HER. FROM MY UNDERSTANDING, SHE AND HER FREEDOM FORCE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR FRIENDS CONDITION, AM I RIGHT?
SEEMS YOU'RE LESS THAN CAREFUL WHERE YOU PLACE YOUR LOYALTIES.
MR. CROSS, MY LOYALTIES ARE WITH MY FRIEND... NOT SOME DEMON MUTANT LADY INTENT ON MY JOINING HER STUPID TEAM.
WELL, THERE IS SOMETHING TO BE SAID ABOUT BEING PART OF A TEAM.
WATCH THIS, OTIS-- SHOULD BE GOOD. CROSS IS ABOUT TO DELIVER THE PITCH TO THIS FIRESTAR SKIRT, TO GET HER TO JOIN THE ARMS, PERMANENT- LIKE. HA, FOR NOW ANYWAY...
...LIKE SHE'S GOT A CHOICE.
WHAT DO YA MEAN ?
S.O.P. MAN-- SHE TURNS HIM DOWN, AN SHE DON'T LEAVE THE COMPLEX ALIVE.
AND PROTECTION, IN THE FUTURE, THIS WORLD CAN BE A HARSH PLACE, EVEN FOR A MALFUNCTION LIKE YOURSELF AND, AN ASSOCIATION WITH US COULD PROVE MUTUALLY PROFITABLE... BUT I'M REPEATING MYSELF.
SHE WON'T KNOW WHAT HIT 'ER !
AN' ME STUCK ON STINKIN' MONITOR DUTY.
ANYWAY, THINK IT OVER FOR A MOMENT, CAREFULLY.

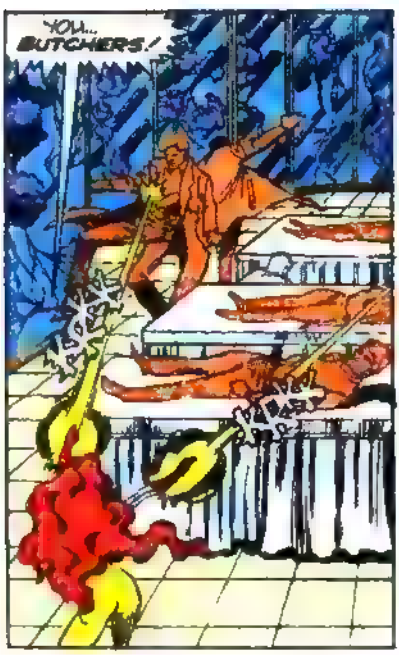
1500 hours. Freedom Force members: Spiral and Avalanche rendezvous with members: Pyro and Blob at the site of their last confrontation with Mutant: Firestar.
Freedom Force leader: Mystique reported MIA—believed abducted by Firestar, purpose unknown—excerpt from Freedom Force official casualty report to NSC.
CAN'T BELIEVE YOU LET THAT LITTLE PRINCESS WHIP YOU!
SHE DID NO WORSE TO US THAN YOU, SPIRAL. WE WERE AT HALF STRENGTH ANYWAY.
ALL I WANT IS ANOTHER CRACK AT 'ER JUST ONE MORE.
IF MYSTIQUE HAS HER WAY WE'LL HAVE THE CHANCE— IF FIRESTAR JOINS FREEDOM FORCE!
NO!
THE BLUE QUEEN HAS HAD HER WAY, AND WHAT'S IT GOTTEN HER? KIDNAPPED!
I SAY WE DO THINGS OUR WAY, NOW—I'LL BET RED DIDN'T CHECK THE BOSS-LADY FOR HER LITTLE TRACKING DEVICE IN HER BELT WE CAN HOME IN ON HER AND ATTACK 'EM EN MASSE.
YEAH, AND WE'LL BE ALL TOGETHER, TOO!
THERE'S SABRE WITH OUR 'COPTER. WE'VE GOT TO KEEP HIM OUT OF THIS, OR HE'LL TRY TO REIN US IN, JUST LIKE MYSTIQUE!
BUFFALO HIM. WE'LL BE IN AND OUT WITH FIRESTAR'S HEAD BEFORE ANY OF THEM ARE ON TO US AND IT'LL BE ALL IN THE LINE OF DUTY.
THEN IT'S AGREED. SOON'S WE FIND 'ER, WE TRIM THE LI'L DINGO.
"The exact sequence of events leading up to the demise of Mutant: Firestar still sketchy. Full investigation of all parties involved requested, ASAP."

1600 hours
AND YOU'RE CERTAIN?
YES. I MAY NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT MY POWERS, BUT I KNOW I'M NOT A MERCENARY. I JUST... IT'S NOT ME. YEAH I'M SURE.
PITY.
WHOOOM
KAK
STUPID LITTLE GIRL.
I HAD YOU PEGGED FROM THE FIRST TIME I SAW YOU -- THIS DAY YOU PULLED YOUR LITTLE FRIEND MEG OUT OF MY HANDS WITH YOUR STUPID SAMARITAN TRICKS.
I TOLD YOU THEN, YOU WERE PLAYING OUT OF YOUR LEAGUE.

OH, I'M GONNA ENJOY SEEING YOUR BRAINS PAINTED OVER MY GLOVE..
KRA-WHOOM
WHAT THE DEVIL..!?
CONTROL CENTER! REPORT!
HOLY, OH MI, HOLY..
YOU BOYS WORKIN' FOR FIRESTAR? WHERE IS SHE?
CROSS, IT'S ALL HITTIN' THE FAN. WE GOT FREEDOM FORCE AT THE B CK DOOR--DANGIT, ALL OVER THE HOUSE! IT'S UGLY, MAN!
CHOOM-
K'A'CHOOM
YOU STUPID..! YOU LED FREEDOM FORCE RIGHT TO US!
I'M NOT SURE I'M HAPPY ABOUT IT, EITHER--EVEN THOUGH THEY MAY HAVE SAVED MY LIFE!
KLLK

LEAVE HER, YOU FOOLS! FALL BACK TO DEFENSIVE POSITIONS!
PULL OUT HEAVY BATTLE ARMOR! I'VE STILL A TRICK OR TWO TO SHOW!
Underground complex displayed extreme stress as a result of Avalanche's structural attack. Exit path of Mutant: Firestar blocked by heavy debris. . .
. . .forcing subject to burn through alternate access-way, marked "top security."
Confusion resulting from attack caused near complete security breakdown — all safeguards around sensitive areas failed. All guards called to battle.
Result, Subject: Firestar attained access to areas from which she was specifically prohibited.
She saw what she was never meant to see.


...the heart of the Arms of Salvation organ donation operation. Customers called in orders for specific donor organs from around the world — organs for which they would pay top dollar.
OH, MY LORD...
Victims who matched specific donor requirements were then abducted by the Arms, and operated on. Survival of the donor, not a priority.
In donor quarters. Subject: Firestar encountered victims Meg Falon, 16, Howard Fallon (father), 45, and Freedom Force Leader Mystique, all in pre-op status.
The discovery is identified as the direct cause of the murder of Subject: Firestar — excerpt from Freedom Force report to NSC re: Operation: Arms of Salvation.


YOU... BUTCHERS!
SLASH
SLASH

MYSTIQUE, OH, G... YOU'VE GOT TO BELIEVE ME, I NEVER DREAMED--

I-I DID WHAT I HAD TO, YOU KNOW?

THERE WASN'T ANYTHING ELSE I COULD DO..
I WANT TO MAKE A DEAL! I'LL LET YOU UP-- LET YOU GO, AND YOU LEAVE ME ALONE!
I JUST WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE.
PLEASE
NO DEALS, FIRESTAR. YOU DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO.
RIGHT.
"After freeing Mystique, Subject: Firestar was accosted by The Arms of Salvation's, identified leader, Subject: Cross, . . .
FIRESTAR! YOU-- YOU'VE DESTROYED AN OPERATION THAT TOOK ME YEARS TO BUILD UP!
KSHH
BUT I'M NOT GOING DOWN ALONE!
I'LL SEE YOU DEAD FIRST!
". . .The man who would kill her."—excerpt from Freedom Force report to NSC re: Operation: Arms of Salvation.
NEXT: THE DEATH OF FIRESTAR!

JUST FRIENDS
PART TWO
"DRAWING STARES"
"I WASN'T ALWAYS THE LOVABLY LOQUACIOUS LOTHARIO I AM TODAY.
"I USED TO BE A KID.
"GRANTED, I WAS A MONSTROUSLY MALPROPORTIONED MISFIT OF A KID
"BUT A KID NONETHELESS."

"IT WAS THE NIGHT OF MY JUNIOR PROM.
"I WAS ALONE.
"BIG SURPRISE, RIGHT?
AAARRRGGG
"THAT IS, I THOUGHT I WAS ALONE.
JENNIFER!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT HERE?
I'M ASKING MY FAVORITE BIOLOGY TUTOR TO THE BIGGEST DANCE OF THE YEAR.
I REALIZE IT'S SHORT NOTICE, BUT--
THE PRETTIEST GIRL IN SCHOOL GOING TO THE PROM WITH MANDILLA GORILLA?
DID BRIAN PUT YOU UP TO THIS?
WHY DON'T YOU PEOPLE LEAVE ME ALONE?!
LOOK, MARK -- I ADMIT, WHEN WE FIRST MET, I TOOK YOU AT FACE VALUE. BUT IN THE HOURS WE'VE SPENT STUDYING...
...I'VE CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF THE GUY BEHIND THE ZOO-PLUS I.Q. AND THE SIZE 13 FEET.
NOW GIVE ME A HUG, YOU BIG HAIRY LUG.
THE TAXI I RENTED IS BACK AT YOUR HOUSE.
"WHAT A WOMAN, HUH?
ISN'T THIS GREAT?
JUST YOU AND ME, REMINISCING ABOUT THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

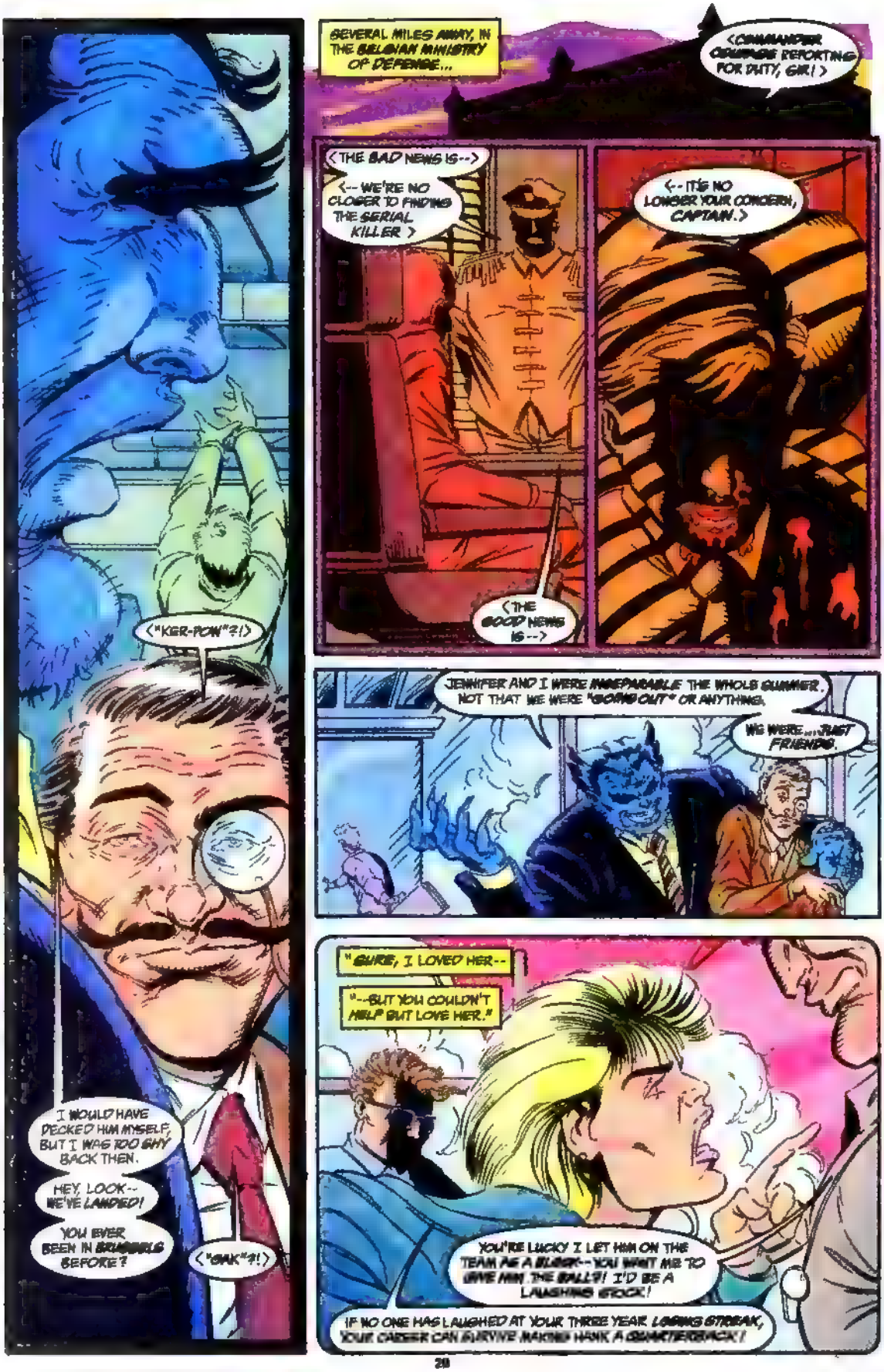
I'M NOT BORING YOU, AM I?
< IF YOU ARE TALKING TO ME, I REPEAT: I DON'T SPEAK A WORD OF ENGLISH >
< THAT'S OKAY, I SPEAK FRENCH. BUT THIS STORY IS MUCH TOO PERSONAL >
* TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH -T.K.
SEE, I HAVEN'T THOUGHT OF JENNIFER IN YEARS, FOR ALL SORTS OF REASONS I FEEL GUILTY ABOUT.
I'M JUST HOPING TO GET THIS OFF MY CHEST
WHERE WAS I?

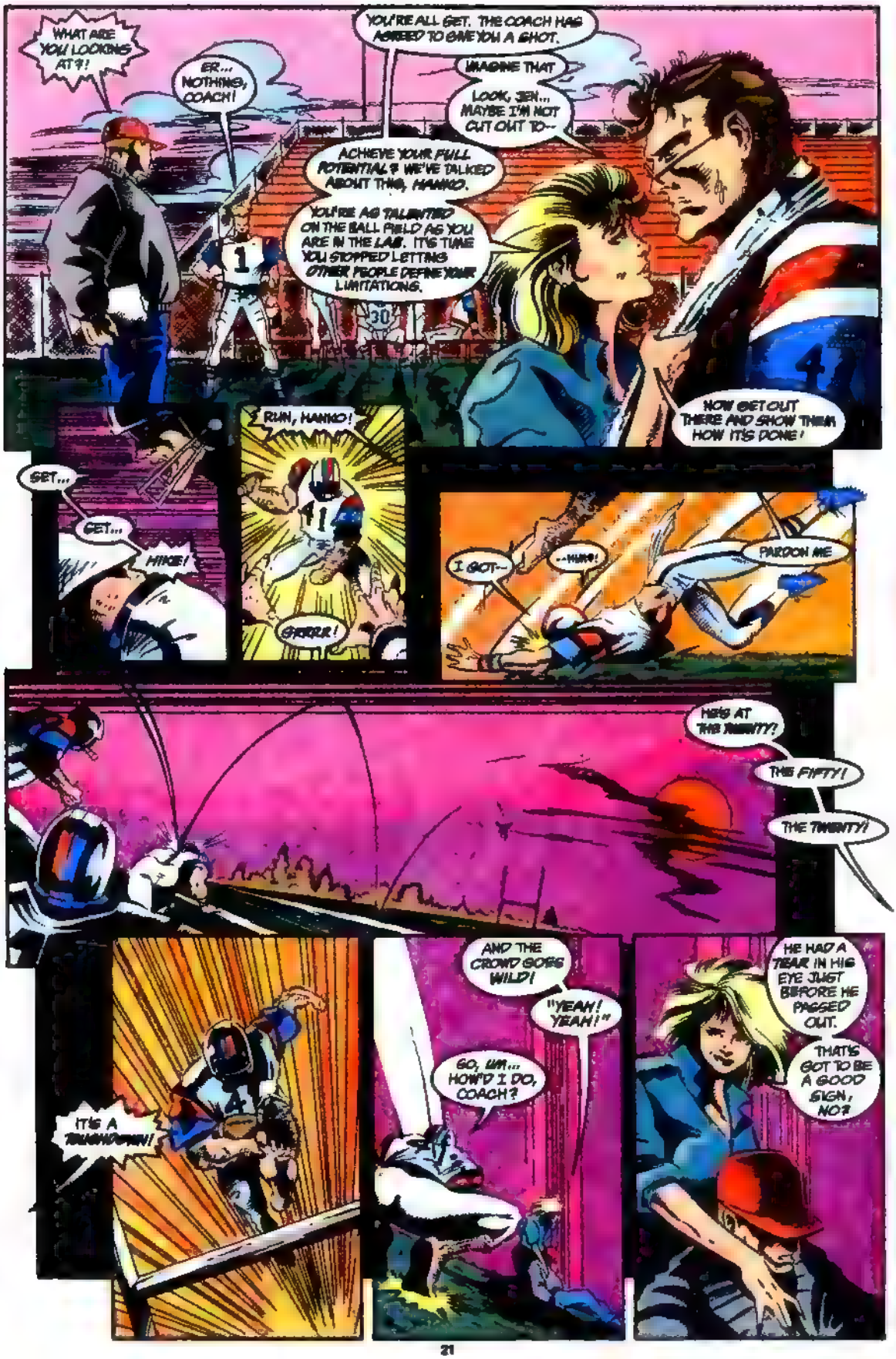
"THE FLIX WAS A LITTLE BIG, BUT SHE TRIED"
JUST ONE MORE PICTURE, KIDS.
SAY "CHEESE"!
ON THREE?
ONE...
TWO...

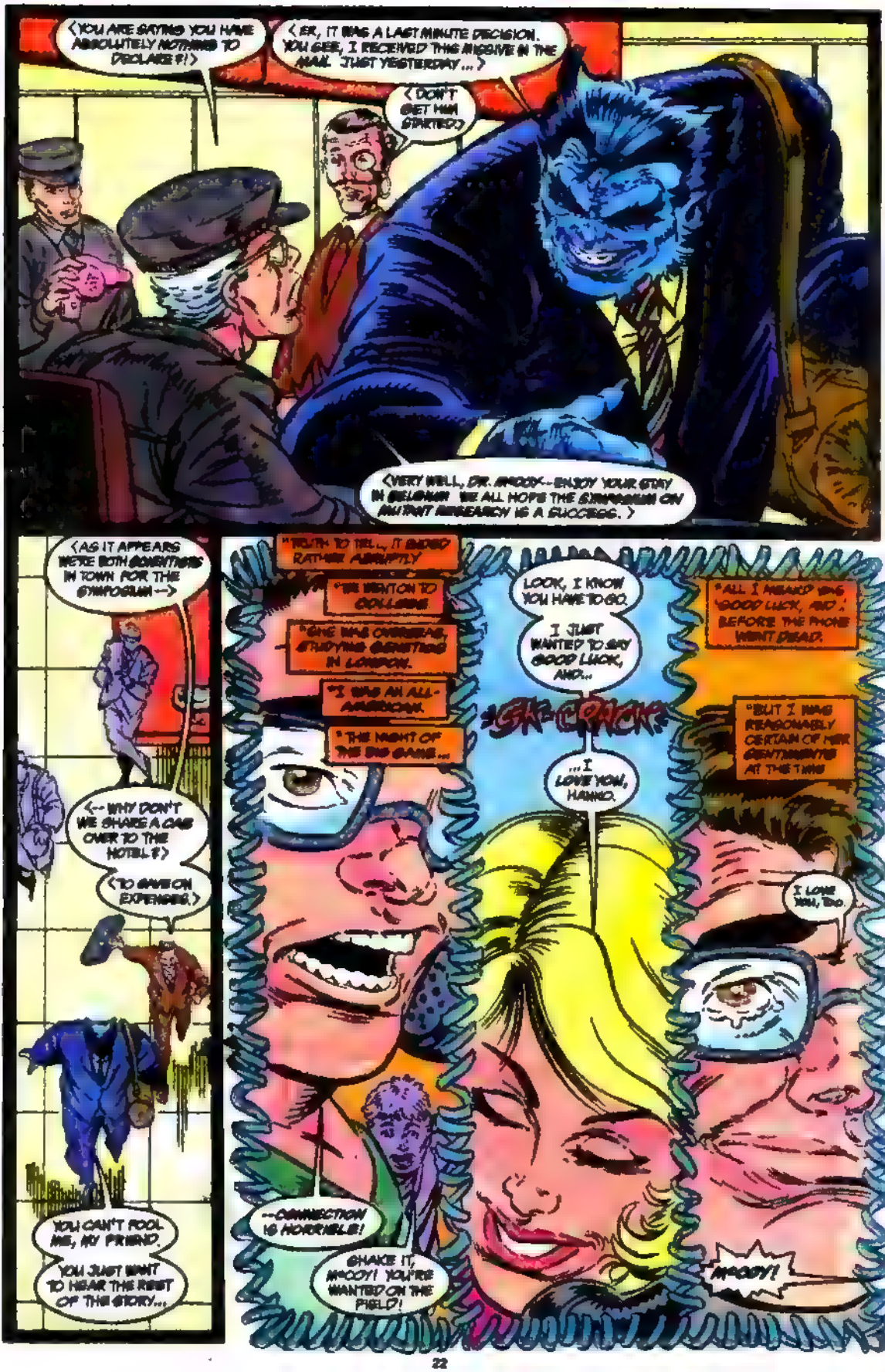
SLAM!
HE MAY NOT KNOW IT YET--
-- BUT I THINK OUR LITTLE BOY IS IN LOVE.

"AT THE PROM...
YOU DRAGGED ME UP FOR THAT?!
HE SHOULD BE WEARING A FLEA COLLAR, NOT A BOW-TIE!
JEN, MAYBE THIS WASN'T SUCH A--
PEOPLE SMOKING AGAIN, EVAN?

I SEE WHY YOU FIND IT SO ADDICTIVE!
KERADOW!
-GAK!-


SEVERAL MILES AWAY, IN THE BELGIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENSE...
<COMMANDER CHAPUIS REPORTING FOR DUTY, SIR!>
<THE BAD NEWS IS--> <-- WE'RE NO CLOSER TO FINDING THE SERIAL KILLER>
<-- IT'S NO LONGER YOUR CONCERN, CAPTAIN.>
<THE GOOD NEWS IS-->
<"KER-POW"?!>
I WOULD HAVE DECKED HIM MYSELF, BUT I WAS TOO SHY BACK THEN.
HEY, LOOK-- WE'VE LANDED!
YOU EVER BEEN IN BRUSSELS BEFORE?
<"OAK"?!>
JENNIFER AND I WERE INSEPARABLE THE WHOLE SUMMER. NOT THAT WE WERE "GOING OUT" OR ANYTHING.
WE WERE... JUST FRIENDS.
"SURE, I LOVED HER--
"--BUT YOU COULDN'T HELP BUT LOVE HER."
YOU'RE LUCKY I LET HIM ON THE TEAM AS A BLOCK-- YOU WANT ME TO GIVE HIM THE BALL?! I'D BE A LAUGHING STOCK!
IF NO ONE HAS LAUGHED AT YOUR THREE YEAR LOSING STREAK, YOUR CAREER CAN SURVIVE MAKING HANK A QUARTERBACK!

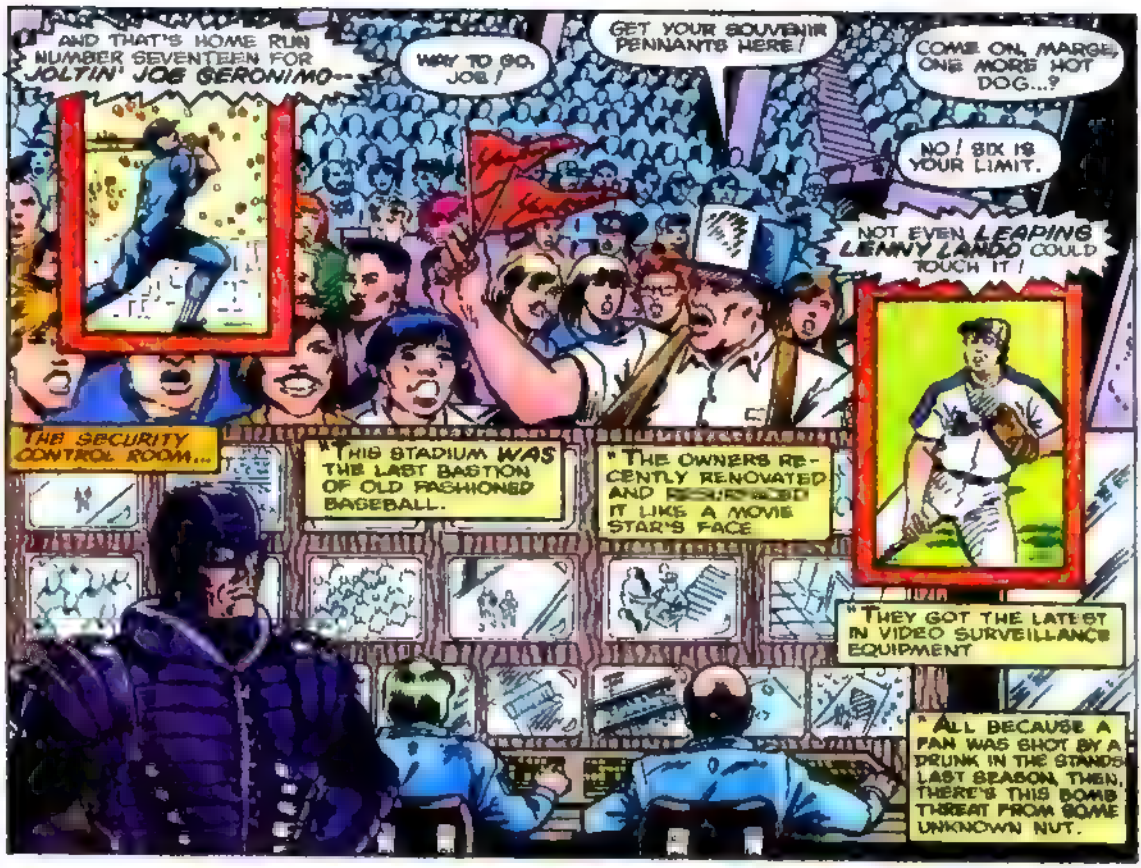

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?!
ER... NOTHING, COACH!
YOU'RE ALL SET. THE COACH HAS AGREED TO GIVE YOU A SHOT.
IMAGINE THAT
LOOK, JEN... MAYBE I'M NOT CUT OUT TO--
ACHIEVE YOUR FULL POTENTIAL? WE'VE TALKED ABOUT THIS, HANK.
YOU'RE AS TALENTED ON THE BALL FIELD AS YOU ARE IN THE LAB. IT'S TIME YOU STOPPED LETTING OTHER PEOPLE DEFINE YOUR LIMITATIONS.
NOW GET OUT THERE AND SHOW THEM HOW IT'S DONE!
SET...
GET...
HIKE!
RUN, HANK!
GRRR!
I GOT--
--HUH?
PARDON ME
HE'S AT THE TWENTY!
THE FIFTY!
THE TWENTY!
IT'S A TOUCHDOWN!
AND THE CROWD GOES WILD!
"YEAH! YEAH!"
SO, UM... HOW'D I DO, COACH?
HE HAD A TEAR IN HIS EYE JUST BEFORE HE PASSED OUT.
THAT'S GOT TO BE A GOOD SIGN, NO?


〈YOU ARE SAYING YOU HAVE ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DECLARE?!〉
〈ER, IT WAS A LAST MINUTE DECISION. YOU SEE, I RECEIVED THIS MISSIVE IN THE MAIL JUST YESTERDAY...〉
〈DON'T GET HIM STARTED〉
〈VERY WELL, DR. McCOY--ENJOY YOUR STAY IN BELGRAD! WE ALL HOPE THE SYMPOSIUM ON ANTIMATTER RESEARCH IS A SUCCESS.〉
〈AS IT APPEARS WE'RE BOTH ATTENDING IN TOWN FOR THE SYMPOSIUM--〉
〈-- WHY DON'T WE SHARE A CAB OVER TO THE HOTEL?〉
〈TO SAVE ON EXPENSES.〉
YOU CAN'T FOOL ME, MY FRIEND.
YOU JUST WANT TO HEAR THE REST OF THE STORY...
"TRUTH TO TELL, IT ENDED RATHER ABRUPTLY.
"WE WENT ON TO COLLEGE.
"SHE WAS OVERSEAS, STUDYING GENETICS IN LONDON.
"I WAS AN ALL-AMERICAN.
"THE NIGHT OF THE BIG GAME...
LOOK, I KNOW YOU HAVE TO GO.
I JUST WANTED TO SAY GOOD LUCK, AND...
"ALL I HEARD WAS 'GOOD LUCK, AND', BEFORE THE PHONE WENT DEAD.
SK-CHICK
"BUT I WAS REASONABLY CERTAIN OF HER SENTIMENTS AT THE TIME.
...I LOVE YOU, HANK.
I LOVE YOU, TOO.
--CONNECTION IS HORRIBLE!
SHAKE IT, McCOY! YOU'RE WANTED ON THE FIELD!
McCOY!

IT WAS ONLY A FEW HOURS LATER THAT THE ORIGINAL X-MEN RESCUED ME FROM THE CRIMSON DAWN!
IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN A SECRET IDENTITY FOR ME, PROFESSOR X TELEPATHICALLY ERASED THE MEMORIES OF ANYONE AWARE OF MY MUTANT ABILITIES.
JEAN KNEW EVERYTHING ABOUT ME. SUBSEQUENTLY, HER MEMORIES WERE ALTERED THE MOST.
ONE DAY I HAD A BRIEF PSIMEI...
...THE NEXT, SHE HAD NO IDEA WHO I WAS.
WELL, WE'RE HERE.
SORRY I DRATTED YOUR BAR OFF. LET ME PAY FOR THE CAB.
GOOD EVENING, SIR.
MAY I TAKE YOUR BAG?
MERCI, NON.
ACCORDING TO THIS PLACARD, SHE'S HERE!
I APPRECIATE YOUR ENTHUSIASM, BELL HOP--
TAP TAP
--BUT I'M ALL SET IN THE LUGGAGE DEPARTMENT, MERCI
LIFE IS TOO FUNNY, NO?
<GOOD LUCK, MY FRIEND.>
DR. JENNIFER KALE IS A KEYNOTE SPEAKER.

AND HIS NAME IS... THE CONSTRICTOR--
--THE ASSASSIN WITH THE ADAMANTIUM COILS!
YOU COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN THIS, CONSTRICTOR--
--BUT TODAY WAS ABSOLUTELY THE WORST DAY YOU COULD HAVE CHOSEN TO KILL ME!
NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME?
I HAVE TO CHECK IN.
BUT I INSIST.
REALLY, IT'S NO PROBLEM...
EH?
ACTUALLY, IT'S A BIG PROBLEM!
CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE...!

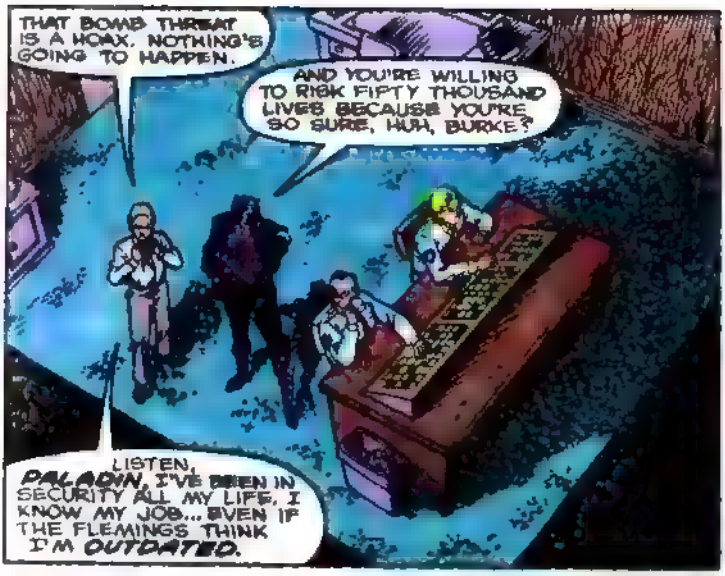
TAKE ME OUT TO THE BOMB GAME
FEATURING PALADIN
METRO STADIUM.
"PEOPLE HAVE TURNED OUT TODAY TO TAKE PART IN ONE OF AMERICA'S GREATEST PASTIMES, BASEBALL
"THEY HAVE NO IDEA THAT THIS MAY BE THEIR LAST BALL GAME, THEIR LAST DAY IN THE SUN."
A WALKWAY UNDER THE STADIUM..
EVERYTHING IS SET TO HAPPEN IN FORTY-FIVE MINUTES YOU KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO?
NO SWEAT WE'RE PRO-FESSIONALS. NOT EVEN THAT HI TECH DO-GOODER THEY HIRED CAN STOP US.
THIS IS GONNA BE THE FIRST BALL GAME CALLED ON ACCOUNT OF MAJOR EXPLOSIVES
HA HA HA
THE GRUFF LAUGH BOUNCES OFF THE WALLS LIKE A FOUL BALL


AND THAT'S HOME RUN NUMBER SEVENTEEN FOR JOLTIN' JOE GERONIMO--
WAY TO GO, JOE!
GET YOUR SOUVENIR PENNANTS HERE!
COME ON, MARGE, ONE MORE HOT DOG...?
NO! SIX IS YOUR LIMIT.
NOT EVEN LEADING LENNY LANDO COULD TOUCH IT!
THE SECURITY CONTROL ROOM...
"THIS STADIUM WAS THE LAST BASTION OF OLD FASHIONED BASEBALL.
"THE OWNERS RECENTLY RENOVATED AND RESURFACED IT LIKE A MOVIE STAR'S FACE
"THEY GOT THE LATEST IN VIDEO SURVEILLANCE EQUIPMENT
"ALL BECAUSE A FAN WAS SHOT BY A DRUNK IN THE STANDS LAST SEASON. THEN, THERE'S THIS BOMB THREAT FROM SOME UNKNOWN NUT.

"HE DEMANDED TWENTY MILLION. THE OWNERS OPTED FOR A SLIGHTLY LESS EXPENSIVE SOLUTION--ME. TODAY IS WHEN IT HITS THE FAN.
"I'M HERE TO MAKE SURE THAT THE ONLY THING THE BASES ARE LOADED WITH ARE PLAYERS.
"IT'S MY KIND OF JOB, LOTS OF MONEY AND ALL THE HOT DOGS I CAN EAT... IN BETWEEN BELTING BADDIES, THAT IS.

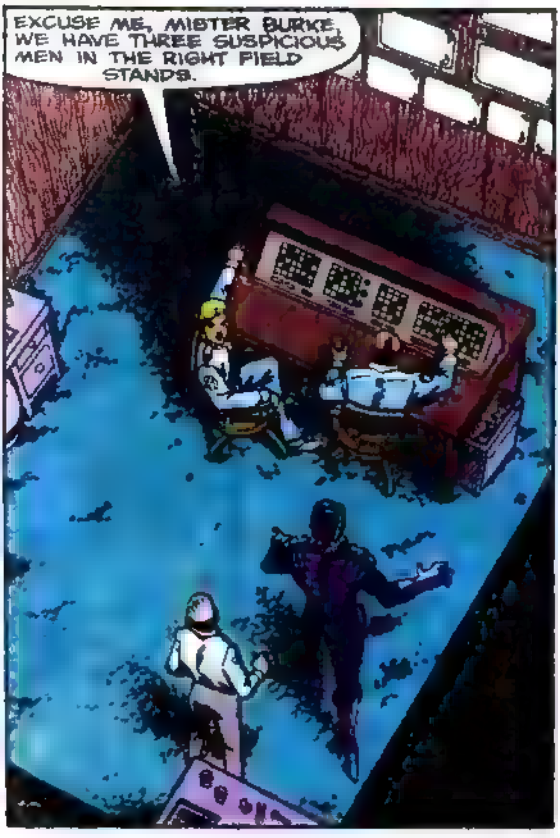
SORRY I'M LATE, BOYS--CAR TROUBLE.
SLAM!

EVERYTHING QUIET?
FOR NOW.

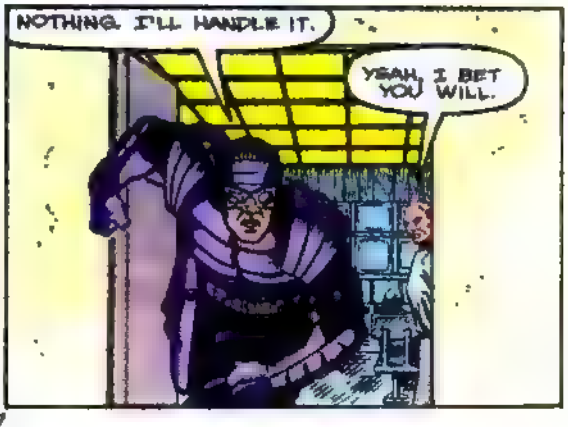

THAT BOMB THREAT IS A HOAX. NOTHING'S GOING TO HAPPEN.
AND YOU'RE WILLING TO RISK FIFTY THOUSAND LIVES BECAUSE YOU'RE SO SURE, HUH, BURKE?
LISTEN, PALADIN, I'VE BEEN IN SECURITY ALL MY LIFE. I KNOW MY JOB... EVEN IF THE FLEMINGS THINK I'M OUTDATED.

I'M NOT GOING TO LET A GRADE-B MERC LIKE YOU SECOND-GUESS ME

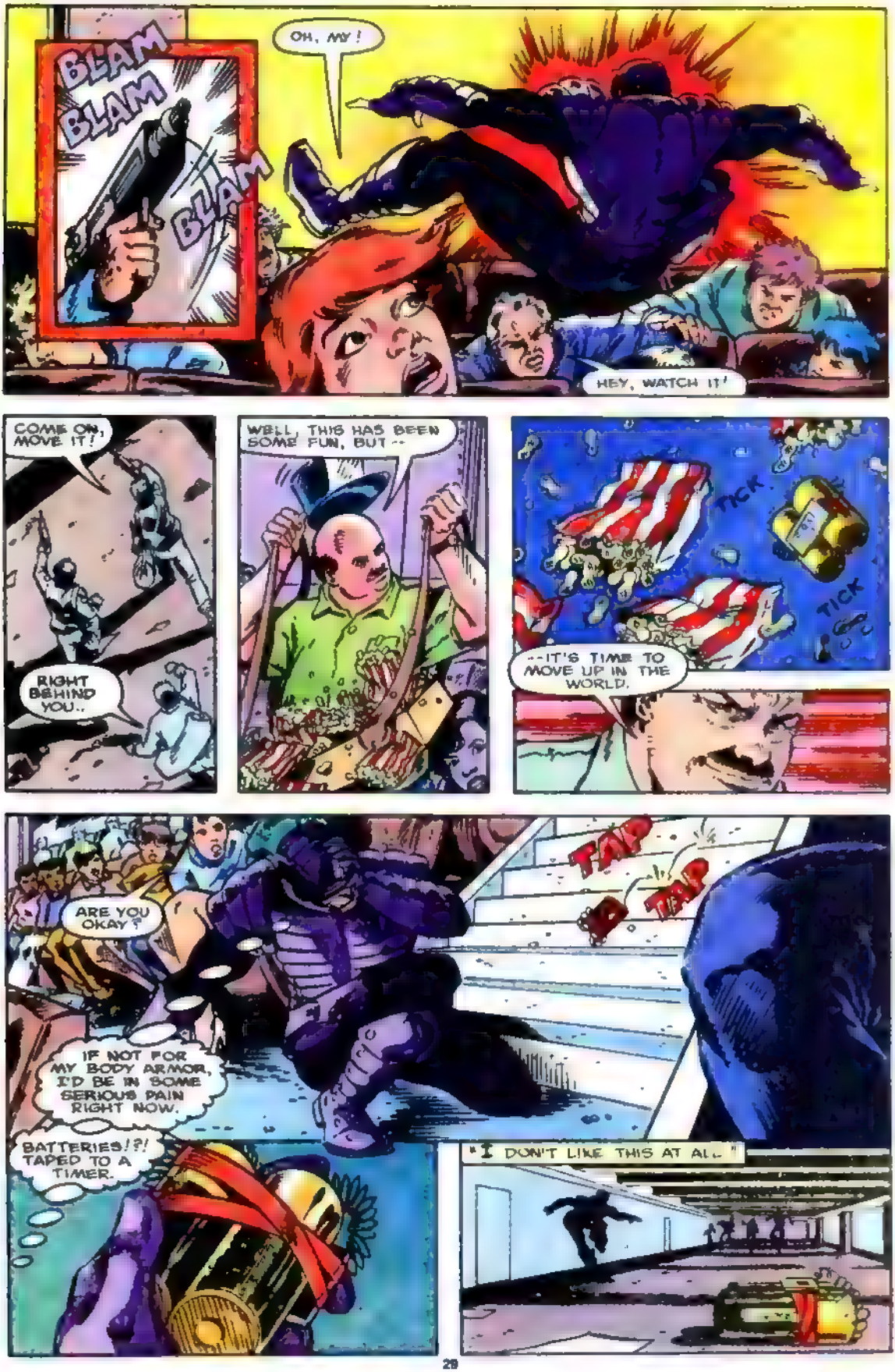
YOU'RE GETTING NASTY, FRIEND. MAYBE IT'S YOUR ATTITUDE THAT GOT YOU FIRED COME THE END OF THIS SEASON... AND NOT JUST YOUR LACK OF SKILLS.
WHY, YOU--


EXCUSE ME, MISTER BURKE. WE HAVE THREE SUSPICIOUS MEN IN THE RIGHT FIELD STANDS.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?


NOTHING. I'LL HANDLE IT.
YEAH, I BET YOU WILL.

WALLY STROKEMUTTER TENSES AT THE PLATE --
--HE SWINGS WITH EVERYTHING HE'S GOT..
PEANUTS! GET YOUR PEANUTS HERE!
...BUT IT ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH.
YOU GUYS LOST?
NAH...AND IF WE WAS, WE WOULDN'T NEED YOUR HELP
REALLY? WHAT'S IN THE KNAPSACK, STUDLEY?
LET ME SHOW YOU.
ALL THREE OF THEM REACH INTO THEIR BAGS BEFORE I CAN --


BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
OH, MY!
HEY, WATCH IT!
COME ON, MOVE IT!
RIGHT BEHIND YOU..
WELL, THIS HAS BEEN SOME FUN, BUT --
TICK
TICK
--IT'S TIME TO MOVE UP IN THE WORLD.
ARE YOU OKAY?
IF NOT FOR MY BODY ARMOR, I'D BE IN SOME SERIOUS PAIN RIGHT NOW.
BATTERIES!?! TAPED TO A TIMER.
TAP
TAP
"I DON'T LIKE THIS AT ALL."

NAIL HIM! I'LL SEE TO IT THAT YOU EACH GET AN EXTRA THOUSAND APIECE.
FOR AN EXTRA THOU I'D TACKLE THOR!
OKAY, COME AND GET ME --
UNGH!
WHAM
--YOU DOPE!
OOOF...
CRUNCH
OWW!
PEANUT VENDOR IS GETTING AWAY.
BUT A BLAST FROM MY STUN GUN SHOULD DO THE TRICK.
UGH!
ZAP
OKAY, TOUGH GUY, WAKE UP.
AH...
WAK
TIME TO TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON HERE.
AND IF I DON'T?
KLIK

A FEW MINUTES LATER...
DAVE DECKER SETS UP AT THE PLATE...
WHERE'S BURKE?
SECURITY
HE JUST LEFT. SOME KIND OF FAMILY EMERGENCY.
AND HE DIDN'T TAKE HIS BRIEFCASE...?
CLEAR THE TABLE.
TICK TICK TICK TICK
AND HE BELTS A BASE HIT!
OKAY, YOU'VE GOT TWO CHOICES--DEFUSE IT OR DIE WITH IT.
GULP
" THERE'S A PRETTY BAD MOMENT AS THE BOMB KEEPS TICKING AFTER HE PRESSES THE HIDDEN ABORT BUTTON. THEN...
DISARMED
GET ONTO THE COPS AND ALERT ALL GATES TO STOP BURKE FROM LEAVING.

THE BASES ARE LOADED... THE CROWD IS GOING WILD!
I DIDN'T GET THE MONEY, BUT I'LL STILL HAVE MY REVENGE.
HERE'S THE PITCH...
NO!
"BURKE IS FAST--
"--BUT NOT FAST ENOUGH!
ZAP
WHAT A SHOT! IT LOOKS LIKE...
CRASH
...YES, IT'S A HOME RUN!
NICE WORK, PALADIN, BUT BURKE WAS HEAD OF SECURITY --WHY WOULD HE DO ALL THIS?!
REVENGE, PLAIN AND SIMPLE. HE KNEW HE WAS GOING TO BE LET GO AT THE END OF THE SEASON IN FAVOR OF A STATE-OF-THE-ART SECURITY SET UP THAT MADE HIM OBSOLETE.
WHEN HIS ANONYMOUS THREAT DID NOTHING BUT BRING ME INTO THE SITUATION, HE SET UP THOSE DECOY "TERRORISTS" TO KEEP ME DISTRACTED AND AWAY FROM THE REAL BOMB IN THE CONTROL ROOM.
IT ALMOST WORKED. BUT YOU MIGHT SAY HE "DIED ON BASE."
THE END

AS HIS PAST CATCHES UP TO HIM. . .
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BATTLES THE CONSTRICTOR™
PALADIN™
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